

**5 Lent
April 7, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Our Gospel reading from John begins with the words: *"Six days before the Passover ... "* It is to remind us that the Jesus story of his Passion, Death, and Resurrection are set in the context of the Passover. Even if you have never been to a Passover Seder meal I imagine that you know the formula: It is the story of the Jews' Exodus from Egypt, and God instructed them to teach the story to their children, and their children's children. It is a meal filled with symbols for a kind of show-and-tell. "Here is the haroset to remind us of the mortar we had to make in slavery." "Here is the salt water to remind us of the tears we shed." "Here is the lamb bone to remind us of the sacrifice we made to mark the doorways so the Angel of Death would pass over us." And during the Passover Seder it is the children who ask the questions: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The Seder ends with the cry in unison, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Notice how this morning's reading from Isaiah begins with a brief retelling of the Exodus ... a pivotal event in the history of the Jews:

*Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:*

This reading is from the section of the Book Isaiah that is referred to as Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah rings with the promise of Israel's restoration to Jerusalem. This proclamation of salvation is God's call, through the prophet Isaiah, to not let the pain and loss of the past burden one's future. God, through Isaiah, was telling the Jews living in exile in Babylon ... and is telling us today ... live in this moment, and have hope for the future.

Isaiah goes on to say:

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

The world is full of horrible things that victimize people: accidents, disease, dysfunctional families, sexual abuse, domestic violence, addictions ... the list is endless. In every case there is a crisis period where we, as individuals and as a community, need to respond with appropriate care. However, there are those who choose to let their past ... often a very horrible past ...

define them. And then there are those who make a choice ... sometimes a very difficult choice ... to move beyond the past ... to regain their “Self,” “to do a new thing.”

We, in the Christian faith, have our own retelling of our faith story each week in the Eucharist. Our Gospel this morning ... the anointing of Jesus with expensive perfume at a dinner at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, is a prefiguring of his anointment with spices after his death. And as painful as the Passion of Jesus on Good Friday may be, it is the Resurrection that we celebrate each week. We are not burdened with the pain and loss ... that is not what defines our faith. It is the “new thing” that defines us ... it is the Resurrection.

It seems to me that this story about Lazarus’s and Martha’s sister Mary and her perfume is a little odd and out of place. If it is “six days before the Passover” then it puts it in Holy Week. But Holy Week ... beginning with Palm Sunday ... is still seven days away. Secondly, this is one of those few stories that shows up in all four gospels ... although in Matthew, Mark, and Luke there is no reference to the Passover.

In John’s version, the woman is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and the newly resurrected Lazarus. The two sisters host a dinner party for Jesus, and it is during the festivities that Mary breaks open her jar, anoints Jesus with spikenard (a scented oil worth a year’s wages) and wipes his feet with her hair. As the musky fragrance of the oil fills the house, Judas rebukes Mary for her misguided generosity: “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” But Jesus rebukes Judas: “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

I will have to be honest ... this story of Mary using a year’s worth of wages to anoint Jesus’ feet, and then Jesus’ rebuke of Judas’s criticism, doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. “You always have the poor with you,” sounds dismissive ... and I find it hard to imagine those words coming from the mouth of Jesus. What is Jesus saying? That the poor don’t matter? That we should accept poverty as inevitable and unfixable? I don’t think so. In fact, many commentators argue that Jesus’s reference here is to Deuteronomy 15:11, whose message about poverty and generosity is crystal clear: “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded.” In other words, the call to care for the poor is constant. It never ceases.

But shouldn’t we be thrifty? Shouldn’t we be frugal ... at least prudent? Shouldn’t we be guided foremost by core our values, our mission statements, and our strategic plans? Isn’t it our ministry to care for those who have less than us? Aren’t we supposed to balance our budgets ... and certainly not waste our money of frivolous things?

According to this story, no ... not always. Not at the expense of something life-giving and the beautiful. Is Mary’s gift lavish? Yes. Is it “useless” in the practical-minded economy Judas brings to the table? Yes. Is it efficient, orderly, or logical? No. And yet Jesus cherishes and blesses it. Think about it this way ... in times of crisis, pain, or trouble in your own life, what has

comforted you the most? What has carried you through? The platitudes of a pragmatist? Or the lavish and intimate “useless” gestures of someone who loves you?

If there is any sense to be made of this story ... at least for me ... it is that there are times when giving away something precious ... especially with our whole heart ... is priceless. It is about doing a new thing.

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah was written about the events of the Babylonian exile ... some 2,700 years ago. However, the truth it points to is just as relevant today as it was then. We all experience painful times in our lives ... sometimes horrifically painful times. Sometimes these events are of such horrific pain that the burden of the loss has the power to define us. Yet, we also lived in a faith that says that there is a hope greater than the past, and we have chosen to live with that hope ... that “new thing” ... rather than have the pain of the past.

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

As we approach the end of this wilderness time of Lent, let us look to the “new thing” God is calling each of us to. Next week is Palm Sunday ... the Sunday of the Passion. We will bless palms and remember Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. We will also read a portion of the Passion Gospel telling of Jesus’ trials, scourging, crucifixion and death. And then we will remember God’s “new thing” as we celebrate the Eucharist.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Amen.